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Women in the Conflict

Lizzie M. Holmes

1891

In numerous ways outside of the labor of hands, women are helping to guide the course of progress, molding the very forms of civilization. There are hosts of all classes of women in the busy West, who are making history, without whose records the annals of this country would be dark and incomplete.

There are in Chicago alone over 300 women's societies, all organized for some object of usefulness, mutual benefit or self improvement. From these societies the young, but already celebrated Woman's Alliance was formed. Delegates, according to numbers of members, are sent from each organization, and these meetings twice a month discuss and investigate every subject pertaining to woman's interest and welfare. It is owing to their unceasing efforts that women are now elected on the school board of Chicago; that women inspect factories where women and children are employed; that matrons have been placed in the police stations; that the condition of female clerks and cash girls and boys is improved, and that two hours' instruction a day is guaranteed to all children under age who work in stores or factories.

In connection with the Woman's Alliance, the Woman's Protective Association has no doubt accomplished more

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in righting wrongs and improving conditions for working women and children than any other organization in the West. No woman can go to them with a positive case of injustice without meeting sympathy and aid to prosecute her claims, usually to a successful end. How many cases of destitution, sorrow and misery the various woman's societies have relieved it would be impossible to estimate. True, it is a mooted question whether temporary alleviation of suffering in individual cases is an unmixed blessing. Undisguised charity is certainly not without evils, and tends to increase the stream of misery and poverty which flows from certain deeply bedded springs, and if these large-hearted women stopped at charity their work might merit more criticism than admiration. But this is not the case. It is safe to state that nearly all of them are interested in sociological investigations, in searching for the hidden causes of poverty, vice and disease, and in seeking to discover means for lifting humanity out of the slough of corruption and suffering into which, in view of a world full of splendid material and strong, willing hands, it is so needlessly sinking. In the meantime it is pleasant to think they are ministering to the needy and suffering. If there were not some alleviation of the misery so many helpless people endure this world would be too sad to live in.

And the influence of the busy brains of women on the advanced thought of the day in the great movement sweeping up from the lower depths of society has scarcely been realized, so accustomed have we become to seeing in women only those gentler virtues which adorn and bless the home life. In the enthusiastic rousing of Western farmers and toilers against the combined powers which keep them poor, no more effective instrument could be found than the untiring devotion of a few women. One, Mrs. Emery, with a strong, trenchant pen exposed the plans by which organized greed systematically obtained the results of the farmers' labor; another, Mrs. M. E. Lease, with an eloquence and power few men ever equaled,

touched the hearts and stirred the sluggish brains of thousands who had before been patiently apathetic. Others were organizers, speakers, writers, earnest workers. The farmers' movement in the West is eminently a movement of women—instituted, guided, carried on by women—not alone of course, but to so great an extent that without them it would scarcely have been a movement.

So much of a showing of what busy women are doing is wonderful when it is considered how short a time ago it was deemed disgraceful for a woman to speak in public or make herself prominent in any way, and that it was exceedingly “out of place” for her to strive to impress her personality on the progress, conditions, customs or thought of her times. But it is not alone the women who have been busy with brain, voice and pen that deserve honorable mention. The women who labor with their hands—these are not last because least, but for the reason that, while their part is most important in making existence endurable, they are following a customary course; doing the work that has always been, more or less, expected of women.

Not all the women of the West are busy, certainly; there are many who have no harder task than to amuse themselves, and find that very difficult. Yet it is a little strange that custom or prejudice or some unexplained fact decrees that these mere adornments of society are superior to the busy women. Why it is hard to discover.

However, the useful women will compare favorably with their idle sisters, even with their disadvantages of lack of leisure and means. Working women in the West have gone as far toward “dignifying labor” as it is possible to do. Notice the clerk or cloak-maker on her way home after working hours; the neat, well fitting ulster covering the dress from neck to toe, appropriate at all times and to all manner of women; the compact, quiet little hat, with its well arranged veil; the easy walk, the composed, self possessed air—could

you determine by her appearance whether she is going to a home in a mansion or one room in a tenement house? — Lizzie M. Holmes in the *Pacific Union Alliance*.